DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 776 FL 027 938

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TITLE	The ESL Framework: Reaccreditation Project.
INSTITUTION	Language Australia, Melbourne (Victoria). Adult Education Resource and Information Service.
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	5p.; Published quarterly.
AVAILABLE FROM	Language Australia, GPO Box 372F Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia. Tel: 03 9612 2600; Fax: 03 9612 2601; e-mail: aris@languageaustralia.com.au; Web site: http://aris.com.au/.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	ARIS Resources Bulletin; v14 n3 Sep 2003
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Education; *Continuing Education; Curriculum Development; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Language Proficiency; Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS	Australia

ABSTRACT

The Victorian ESL (English as a Second Language) Framework is currently undergoing renewal as part of the reaccreditation process. This ESL curriculum framework, developed in Victoria, Australia, is currently used in TAFE Institutes and private and community adult ESL programs. It provides a framework for 10 certificate courses across three streams at four certificate levels. The new version can be used for adult ESL courses anywhere in Australia. The framework is designed to provide flexibility and pathways for the range of adult ESL learners (beginner to advanced) in post-compulsory education and training. The three streams allow providers to offer courses with a general, academic, or vocational focus. This paper looks at the following: the project to date; reasons for a new structure and design; what the research shows on the subject; changes made in the areas of ESL levels, specialization at lower levels, achievement of proficiency, and new streams; the current and proposed framework at a glance; electives in the ESL framework; and transition arrangements. (SM)

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SEPTEMBER 2003 VOLUME 14 NUMBER 3

The ESL Framework Reaccreditation Project

By **Liz Davidson**, *Project Officer, Victoria University.*

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The ESL Framework Reaccreditation Project

*By **Liz Davidson**, Project Officer, Victoria University.*

The Victorian ESL Framework, is currently undergoing renewal as part of the reaccreditation process. Users of crown copyright further education courses like the ESL Framework and the CGEA, will be aware that reaccreditation occurs every five years or so to ensure currency of curriculum.

With funding from OTTE, the project is being overseen by a project steering committee (the Curriculum Advisory Group for the ESL Framework), which represents TAFE Institutes, ACFE providers and private providers in Victoria. The management of the project is being undertaken by the Curriculum Maintenance Manager for General Studies, Jane Cussen, working together with Liz Davidson as Project Officer/Writer. A new curriculum document will be sent to the Victorian Qualification Authority (VQA) in October for accreditation and then published ready for implementation in 2004.

WHAT IS THE ESL FRAMEWORK?

It is an ESL curriculum framework, developed in Victoria, currently in use with TAFE Institutes and private and community providers of ESL to adults. It provides a framework for 10 certificate courses across three streams, at 4 certificate levels (AQF levels 1-4). The new version, like the currently accredited Framework, can be used for ESL courses for adults anywhere in Australia.

The aim of the Framework is to provide flexibility and pathways for the range of adult ESL learners (beginner to advanced) in post compulsory education and training. The three streams allow providers to offer courses with a general, academic or vocational focus.

THE PROJECT TO DATE

A new qualification structure and course design was endorsed by the project steering committee in August, 2003. The background to the process has included research and consultation with providers (including a review conducted in 2002) as well as research into current practice overseas. Feedback from learners has also been sought via post course surveys. The project is currently focussed on developing the modules for the final document. These are being reviewed and edited over the next month.

WHY A NEW STRUCTURE AND DESIGN?

A new structure and design came about because of a number of factors and processes. Feedback from practitioners using the current curriculum provided much of the direction, and led to research to find answers to some of the issues. Practitioners identified issues with ESL levels, streaming and with the learning outcomes, and some of the assessment criteria within the modules. These have been of particular concern recently since AQTF compliance has meant more moderation, and closer scrutiny of the requirements of the document. The VQA requirements and AQTF compliance have also determined new components of the curriculum. The current modules provide lists of learning outcomes with assessment criteria and suggested assessment tasks. The VQA module template requires additional guidance for implementation of modules under the sections 'Range of Variables', and 'Critical Aspects of Evidence'. The need to flesh out the modules prompted research into current adult ESOL curriculum design (for example, the work done by the Council of Europe, the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000, and the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum, UK).

WHAT THE RESEARCH HAS TOLD US

The result of the research and consultation has led to recognition of the need to include more detail and guidance. There is a need to comprehensively describe language proficiency levels within the proposed document. The other consideration has been to ensure that the context for the learning outcomes is not restrictive for learners and teachers. It has been recognised that the curriculum needs to ensure there is a clear notion of negotiability for local content and setting of personal goals in development of courses to meet the needs of a range of learner groups. The curriculum has to be open enough to give people what they need, but designed in such a way as to allow portability of credentials.

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In a recent article about ensuring quality of outcomes in ESL curriculum, Crabbe (2003: 14) presents a list of criteria for valid outcomes:

'...*that they are:*
- *based on a valid construct of proficiency...*
- *relevant to the needs of learners*
- *specific enough to guide effort*
- *a challenge to the learners, leading to motivation and effort*
- *measurable*'

These criteria are reflected in the redesigned document, particularly in relation to the notion of "a challenge to the learners".

A common criticism of outcomes based language curriculum is that it describes outcomes in such a way that teachers are commonly tempted to teach to individual descriptors (see, for example, McKay 2000) and that it oversimplifies the conditions of and processes of language learning by the way it describes outcomes. It is intended that the proposed curriculum both encourages teachers to integrate delivery and assessment of learning outcomes as much as possible and that it presents a view of language learning as complex.

WHAT CHANGES HAVE BEEN MADE?

The following brief explanation of the proposed changes to the design of the qualifications will give teachers considering delivery for the first time in 2004 some idea of what to expect.

ESL LEVELS

Providers working with the current version of the ESL Framework, have found that trying to fit groups of ESL learners across only four levels of ESL (in other words, according to the AQF which has nothing to do with language) does not actually work. Most second language proficiency levels or scales provide descriptors for more than four levels (they range from 7 up to 12 here and internationally) to accommodate the range of acquisition levels from beginner to advanced learners. It seemed logical to look at spreading learners across more than 4 levels to facilitate better grouping of learners, so a fifth level was introduced (see table 1).

SPECIALISATION AT LOWER LEVELS

The current document provides for streaming of learners into vocational and academic focus groups at a very low level of language proficiency, in other words, before they have acquired even enough language to cope with everyday, personal needs. Current practice reveals that there are few providers offering specific focus courses below Certificate III (in other words at about 1+ ISLPR level), and in fact the extra streams at level II were only used to offer learners another course at the same level to help consolidate skills before moving up. Rather than trying to design courses with a vocational or academic focus, providers have found they need more general focus courses at the lower levels. Therefore it is proposed to stream only at Certificate III and IV levels.

ACHIEVEMENT OF PROFICIENCY

The issue of the length of time it takes some learners to proceed through proficiency levels has been raised on many occasions during consultations, and this is being considered very carefully. It may appear that learners have less choice or opportunity to stay at a particular level if they need more time now that there is to be only one stream below Certificate III. However, there will be greater opportunity to develop skills through what will now be more comprehensive courses for Certificate I Entry, Access I and Access II. This will be coupled with more opportunity to develop longer courses at the point of delivery should particular learner groups require more time to complete.

NEW STREAMS

The new Framework will retain the three streams it has at present, with some name changes and different content. The Academic stream will be renamed Further Study to incorporate the range of further study options as not all learners proceed to strictly academic pathways. Further study can include training in a range of settings and for a range of purposes. The Vocational Stream will be renamed Employment, and broaden its focus to include skilled and experienced workers, those wishing to set up their own business, as well as new job seekers. The two new streams being introduced are Entry (at Certificate I only) and Professional (at Certificate IV only). Entry offers the opportunity to develop initial beginning level courses. The Professional stream is designed specifically for overseas-qualified professionals such as doctors, nurses and engineers, seeking entry into their professions in Australia.

THE CURRENT AND PROPOSED FRAMEWORK AT A GLANCE

Table 2 outlines the main changes from the old ESL Framework and the additional features of the new Framework.

Another proposed change to the original ESL Framework relates to identified inconsistencies in the learning outcomes. One inconsistency is the lack of connection between many of the learning outcomes across the four macro skills. For example, in the Access Stream, at Certificate I level, learning outcome 1 in the Listening module and learning outcome 1 in the Speaking module, are not obviously complementary or connected. The same is true for learning outcome 3 in the Reading module and learning outcome 3 in the Writing module.

The other inconsistency concerns gaps which have been identified (by both teachers and learners) within and between levels. There is also some repetition of learning outcomes across streams and levels as well as within levels. Progression in skill complexity up through the four levels is not always consistent.

TABLE 1 – PROPOSED NEW ESL FRAMEWORK STRUCTURE

Recommended Entry ISLPR		Entry	Access	Further Study	Employment	Professional
2+/3	→		Certificate IV in ESL (Access)	Certificate IV in ESL (Further Study)	Certificate IV in ESL (Employment)	Certificate IV in ESL (Professional)
2	→		Certificate III in ESL (Access)	Certificate III in ESL (Further Study)	Certificate III in ESL (Employment)	
1+	→		Certificate II in ESL (Access)			
1	→		Certificate I in ESL (Access)			
0/1-	→	Certificate I in ESL (Entry)				

TABLE 2

Current Document	Proposed Document
■ **4 Levels** ■ **10 certificates**	■ **5 Levels** ■ **10 certificates**
■ **3 streams** – Access – Vocational – Academic	■ **5 streams** – Entry – Access – Further Study – Employment – Professional
■ **Core Modules** – ***In the Access stream*** Listening, Oral Communication, Reading and Writing (4) – ***In the Academic stream*** Oral Communication Reading & Writing (3) – ***In the Vocational stream*** Communication in the Workplace, Job Seeking, Language of Problem Solving (3)	■ **Core Modules** – 4 core modules. All streams and all levels will have core modules in Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing A Job Seeking module will be available as an elective
Learning Outcomes ■ 3 compulsory learning outcomes for each core modules,plus ■ the opportunity to select ***at least*** 1 additional learning outcome (not necessarily related to the skill area of the module). Additional learning outcomes can be selected from any curriculum or training package.	**Learning Outcomes** ■ Core modules consist of learning outcomes, all of which are compulsory. – Access & Entry streams have 5 learning outcomes – Vocational & Professional streams have 4 learning outcomes – Further Study stream has 6 learning outcomes There are no additional learning outcomes. The removal of the additional learning outcome option will facilitate moderation. Choice and flexibility is maintained within the curriculum in the design of new learning outcomes which are more generic and less narrow in their specifications. The "Range of Variables" within each module will allow for a much wider choice of content and context for achieving learning outcomes.

In the new Framework learning outcomes are all interconnected across the skill areas. For example, learning outcome 1 in the Access stream in Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing is concerned with Social Interaction: that is conversation (for Speaking and Listening) and messages (for Reading and Writing). Learning outcome 2 is concerned with instructions and recording information, learning outcome 3 with transactions, learning outcome 4 with giving and receiving information, and learning outcome 5 with creative texts and responses.

Learning outcomes at a particular level are also connected to the equivalent learning outcomes above or below. Each level is more demanding in its degree of sophistication and complexity than the previous one. For example, in learning outcome 1 (Conversation and Messages) in the Entry stream, the learning outcomes for Listening and Speaking, will focus on introductions and greetings. By Level IV the learning outcomes will involve participation in sustained casual conversations.

ELECTIVES IN THE ESL FRAMEWORK

The original Framework includes the following elective options, each of which could be made up of a selection of learning outcomes from a list of suggested learning outcomes:

- Orientation to higher education in Australia
- Australian work environment and culture
- Occupational Health and Safety
- Computer Operations
- Australian Studies
- Computer Operations
- Employment and Living Skills
- Practical Placement

The proposed new Framework will retain elective options, with a number of changes. These include:

- an Australian Studies elective, based on the existing, but divided into a number of smaller modules and available at all certificate levels
- A new Computers for Language Learning elective at the lower levels
- A Practical Placement elective for certificates III and IV

Learning outcomes from existing electives will be incorporated into Australian Studies or replaced with Units of Competency from Training Packages, or modules from other Further Education curriculum documents. Guidance on selection will be provided in the document.

TRANSITION ARRANGEMENTS

Transition arrangements will be explained in the reaccredited document. Because there are a number of proposed changes in the entry and exit levels and in the content of core modules, it will be recommended that providers use ISLPR assessment of students as a guide to placement in courses at certificate levels appropriate to learner groups.

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